WOMEN ARTISTS NEWS

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Film and Video • Artists ... bitions

mythology, romance, and sociology of housework. By using a close-up camera and miniature tea service, cutting, dicing food with soap-opera love songs as audio, she made the audience look into a peep hole environment. The result was that house chores became mythic. The second piece, with similar almost voyeuristic camera exploration, *Putting On and Taking Off*, was a study of the visual and kinetic properties of women's clothes combining the intimacy of a private performance before a mirror with the sumptuous treatment of surfaces as found in 17th and 18th century paintings of fabric. What I liked most about Wooster's work were the clear, close-up camera shots, the fresh examination of everyday rituals such as cooking and dressing. Those overly-common and therefore unheeded acts became politicized in visual poetry that did not degenerate into polemic cliché.

The core of the program centered around pioneers: **Mary Ellen Bute**, whose first animations were shown at Radio City Music Hall in the 1930's and **Sara Kathryn Arledge**, whose recently rediscovered film masterpieces span from 1941 to the present day. Arledges *Introspection* (1941), an avant-garde dance film, shows disembodied parts of dancers moving freely in black space, forming a moving and rhythmic three-dimensional design of semi-abstract shapes. In 1958, *What is a Man?* was released. The imagery and dialogue are inspired by *Finnegans Wake*. The film relates the fate of a woman named "Somebodyelsie", as she visits a used-car salesman named "Bearwolf", to a physician she calls a "sigh-cryatryst" saying, "Teacher, teacher, I declare, I see somebody's underwear." Minutes later in the film she asks, "Can I leave the womb?" and the doctor replies, "From inhibition unexcelled *you're* asking me to be expelled? By thirty-two you ought to know, if you gotta go, you gotta go!" Our heroine, Somebodyelsie, confronts patriarchal authority with intercut footage of laboratory experiments on rats. In the recent screening at the American Film Institute in Washington, D.C. *What Is Man?* is described in the catalogue on women's films as a rediscovered mini-masterpiece that takes a satiric poke at man. Another type of film Arledge produces is animations of 4" × 6 3/4" old-lantern slides, each one a miniature luminous painting. These films were made between 1946 and 1956. I saw them firsthand in Pasadena in 1978 and was enthralled by the jewel-like crystal luminescence. For the series, I chose one: *Iridum Sinus* (Cave of the Rainbow), in which the images dissolve into each other to the sound of birds. Yes, Arledge gives us her 72 years of wisdom in her films and words, as a sage of vision.

Film As Art

By improper direction and use of technical advances; by improper education; and, overall, by improper goals, we have created patterns of society and counter-patterns of living that are so dull that they can only be animated, temporarily, by sensationalism, which we find in the media, in politics and in our sex lives.

This sensationalism provides us with an excitement disconnected from the true significance of living. This shallow excitement moves our blood around and sometimes even passes for art. But it is the opposite of the function of art.

The function of art is to awaken in us an understanding of our true potential.

Sensationalism stunts growth and development of the most recently evolved part of the human mind—not only stunts it by the media, but by the school system's utter neglect of the right brain. People with active right hemispheres should be sought out for this training of our young.

The old Roman letters carved in cement on the proscenium arch of universities, "Where there is no vision, the people perish," state a fact. We are facing the results of that fact now.

While a way of seeing called "vision" animates artists' communications at times, true vision is non-transferable. Each human may discover her/his own, which also contains elements common to all of us.

—Sara Kathryn Arledge

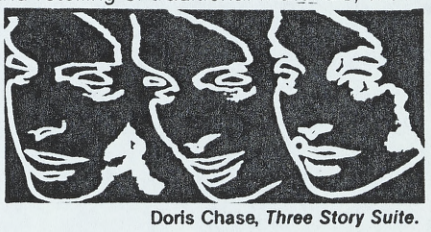
In the early 1950's, **Mary Ellen Bute*** experimented with oscilloscope-generated images, thus becoming the first to explore the special-effects potential of video technology. She achieved a poetic unity of space, light, sound and color in such films as *Rhythm in Light* (1934), *Synchrony No. 2* (1935), *Spook Sport* (1938), *Polka Graph* (1947) and *Color—Rhapsody* (1948). All these titles were featured in a special evening-long tribute to Bute. (Both Arledge and Bute are my personal nominations for next year's Women's Caucus for the Arts Life Achievement Awards.) Her short animated films were shown across the United States at first-run art theaters as well as Radio City Music Hall. Then and now, her films are forever fresh. The May screening was packed and the audience responded enthusiastically. I am so happy to see that Mary Ellen Bute, in her 80's, had a major retrospective of her work at the Museum of Modern Art this year. Now Bute and Arledge must be written into the film history books. To that end, Cecile Starr is coordinating a group, *Pioneer American Women's Film Research Project*, which includes fifty women making films before 1968. The results may be a whole series of books.

*Bute was featured in an article by Alida Walsh in *Women Artists News*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Summer 1980.

Doris Chase's finely-wrought films and video of dance and sculpture have highlighted the field of independent camera for ten years. A two-evening event of all new work included *Concepts*, composed of collaborations with Off-Broadway theater artists. In these translations of theater to screen, Chase gives a visual dimension to words, emotion and dramatic theater. The result is multi-dimensional poetry. My personal favorite is *Electra Tries to Speak*, showing the transformation of a theater piece to video during a four month period. *Electra*, played by Sondra Segal and written by Clare Coss and Roberta Sklar, addresses the emerging independent woman in the roles of father, mother, sister—roles of adoption—trying to speak after millenia of being the silent majority, in dependency, trepidation and the will-to-be. A deeply intimate portrayal in poetic form about the struggle to emerge whole from the cocoon; clichéd influences, social expectations bound by feminine development.

Doris Chase, *Electra Tries to Speak*.

Doris Chases's other video works were *Glass Curtain, Three Story Suite* and *Musk*. *Glass Curtain*, written by Chase and performed by Jennie Ventriss, is a poem in prose, a picture of a woman coping with the dimming mind of her mother who suffers from Alzheimer's Disease. "Sometimes there's a sparkle in her Irish wit, but then, in the middle of a thought, she'll stop and ask when is your father coming home, my father who's been dead for five years."—an extremely personal story, yet universal. *Three Story Suite* (1983) is a trio of folktales performed by storyteller Laura Simms. Video effects are used to make visual the magic of these age-old myths. Included are both original works by Simms and retelling of traditional materials, with



Doris Chase, *Three Story Suite*.